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Ian C. Willis

University of Wollongong, iwillis@uow.edu.au

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Banishment, transportation and a penal settlement

Abstract

On January 26, 1788 a group of sailing ships unloaded their human flotsam and jetsam in Sydney Cove. Amongst those who were landed were souls who were part of the dark story of banishment and exile that dates back to Roman times. The foundation of the Australian nation was just one part of a global story of forced human suffering that is still going on today.

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Back then ...

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Banishment, transportation and a penal settlement

By Dr Ian Willis

While readers have been well informed of the history of Camden and Wollondilly through Back Then over the years; this historical section now includes every once-in-a-while a piece on Sydney's history, which is sure to inform and maybe shed light on how parts of the city were formed and some of the people who lived before and contributed.

On January 26, 1788 a group of sailing ships unloaded their human flotsam and jetsam in Sydney Cove. Amongst those who were landed were souls who were part of the dark story of banishment and exile that dates back to Roman times. The foundation of the Australian nation was just one part of a global story of forced human suffering that is still going on today.

Penal colonies, which are settlements where prisoners are exiled in a remote location from the general population, are hundreds of years old. Historically they have been used in under-developed colonial territories and are little more than slavery. Sometimes these settlements are run under the guise of indentured labour.

Once European powers started their rise to power from the 16th century forced labour settlements were developed across the globe. Islands were the favourite location and according to Michael Bogle's 'Convicts' included Gibraltar, Cuba, Bermuda, Mauritius, Sakhalin, Sumatra, French Guyana and the Antilles. These settlements were usually military garrisons which ensured their security.

Punishments were dished out in the form of rough justice and could include, according to Bogle, "deprivation, physical punishment and death". Forced labour was normal, meals were haphazard and colonies were completely dominated by men. Local populations were ignored or rounded up as enforcers of order.

Before convicts were dumped in New South Wales the British sent around 50,000 convicts to colonial America through a system of indentured servitude. Most were auctioned by merchants to plantation owners. The American Revolution stopped all that in the 1780s.

In England the conditions of the Industrial Revolution had created rural dislocation and hysteria around property crime in towns and cities that had no permanent police force. Exiling criminals on the other side of the world seemed a reasonable punishment. Popular literature reflected the moral panic around the crime and misery that shaped British society. Imagined lawlessness was part of the popular imagination evidenced by the popularity of the 'Penny Dreadfuls'.

After the loss of the American colonies the British used colonies of New South Wales, Van Diemen's Land, Queensland and Norfolk Island. Convicts were put to work on a variety of government projects, as well as assigned to pas-

toralists and landed gentry.

The aim of the First Fleet, with its cargo of humans was to set a vast distance between Botany Bay and Britain. On arrival Captain Phillip found Botany Bay unsuitable and moved the fleet to Port Jackson. The new penal settlement at Sydney Cove was a military garrison administered over the following decades by a series of naval and army officers.

Penal settlements were extended into other parts of the Australian continent and surrounds. Those who re-offended were sent to harsher - more remote - penal settlements. By the time transportation stopped in 1868 more than 160,000 had been exiled from England, Ireland and the British colonies.

The main localities for penal settlements included: Botany Bay/Sydney (1788); Norfolk Island (1789); Hobart, Van Diemen's Land (1803); Newcastle, NSW (1804); Port Macquarie, NSW (1821); Sarah Island, Macquarie Island, Van Diemen's Land (1821); Moreton Bay, NSW (1824); Fort Dundas, Melville Island (1824); Maria Island, Van Diemen's Land (1825); Port Arthur, Van Diemen's Land (1832); and later at The Swan River Colony, WA (1850).

Women who were transported to penal settlements were often confined in the Female Factories at Parramatta, Hobart and Moreton Bay. They were put to work sewing and needlework of various types making a range of items from clothing and hats to ropes and nets. The author Michael Bogle maintains that some of the female factories were "Australia's first manufacturing concerns" working in a piecework system.

Women convicts who did not co-operate were subject to solitary confinement, restricted food, breaking rocks and 'hair-cropping', which apparently was "the most resented punishment". There were female factories at a variety of localities including Parramatta, Newcastle, Moreton Bay, Port Macquarie, Bathurst, Launceston, Hobart and Ross.

There is a general myth that has lasted for decades that convicts were illiterate and had few skills. There has been research in recent decades of British embarkation and colonial debarkation records in works like Stephen Nicholas's 'Convict Workers' and Deborah Oxley's 'Convict Maids'. This has shown that the literacy rates and skills of convicts were the same or better than the English and Irish working classes.

Generally speaking most convict women could be classified as domestic servants, while male convicts had a host of skills with town trades dominating over rural workers. Convicts were usually employed in a number of ways by the colonial authorities: assignment; government work gangs; Tickets of Leave; Conditional Pardon; and an Absolute Pardon with complete freedom to do as they wished including returning to Britain.



First Fleet Sydney Cove 1788 SLNSW



Military Barracks Norfolk Is c2000 (Flickr/Daggar)

Once landed the convicts were guarded by military personnel, which provided security within the colonies and against outside threats. Many discharged soldiers settled in the colonies and raised their families, who sometimes accompanied them. Some military personnel were given grants, livestock and other stores. Many officers and enlisted men conducted businesses, and some were quite successful. Michael Bogle makes the point that the army had a central role designing and constructing the town centres, which influenced their long term success. Incidents or revolts were common and stressed the importance of the presence of the military to maintain order.

Amongst the convicts there was a large imbalance between men and women. Convicts were encouraged to marry and the colonial authorities offered basic schooling for orphans. The life of one female convict has been documented in Babette Smith's 'A Cargo of Women: Susannah Watson and the Convicts of the Princess Royal'. The Hyde Park Barracks Museum has tracked the story of three convict families in its 1999 exhibition 'Convicts'.

Food rations issued to convicts were a con-

tentious issue. They could be abused by cooks or stores supervisors and this led to disputes. Salted beef was preferred to fresh kangaroo. The issue of rations could include salted beef or pork, flour, maize as well as sugar and salt. Stealing food was looked on dimly and could be punished by loss privileges, flogging or a stint on the treadmill. Food rations were so critical to the First Fleet that within the first month of the settlement convict Thomas Barret was hanged for stealing from the stores. A year later six Royal Marines were hanged for raiding the Commissariat stores.

Convict transportation to New South Wales was suspended in 1840. Attempts by the British Government led to protests from the Australasian Anti-Transportation League founded in 1849. Transportation stopped in Van Diemen's Land in 1853 and Western Australia in 1868. In Great Britain transportation was compared to slavery at the 1837 Select Committee of the House of Commons on Transportation. The last convict transport to enter Port Jackson to loud protests from Sydney folk was the Hashemy in 1849.

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